

## Just Friends by Rome Reginelli

Elias had always thought that Allison was a nice girl. She was two years younger than him; he knew her because her brother Dan had been in his AP US History class. Dan and Elias never really understood each other – to the best of Elias’s knowledge, anyway, Dan had never understood him, and certainly Elias hadn’t the faintest idea of what made Dan tick – but the two of them tolerated each other amiably, and even considered each other as friends for a period. And so, one time, when Dan had a few people over to his house, Elias and Allison met.

Immediately the two discovered that they were much more suited to be friends with each other than with Dan. A couple of the guys had been bantering about starting a game of foosball when Allison poked her head out from one of the back rooms.

“What are you doing, Allison?” Dan started less than affectionately. “Need something?”

She pursed her lips, the proper response not springing forth. Elias felt a twinge of pity for the sister being shut out of the happenings of her own home. “You want to play?” he offered.

She perked up entirely. “Can I?”

“I guess,” Dan conceded, and soon they were embroiled in a three versus three, a heated challenge of passion and skill, with each side spinning their little plastic men furiously so that it seemed the tiny soccer ball would break loose from its table. Dan took one side with his cousin Angel and their friend Mario; Elias teamed with another friend from school, Courtney, and Allison as goalie. For her part, Allison proved her worth with sharp, effective motions, belying a competitive streak long practiced against

her brother and anyone else who dared challenge her.

The game dragged on; comebacks kept each side neck and neck, and vigorous trash talking kept spirits high. Elias very early on became aware (or rather, informed) that his team was made up predominantly of women and that their triumph might be considered some kind of accomplishment on the side of female empowerment. This seems to incense Dan's team against them more than anything, and soon the match was down to its final point, sudden death, the single goal which would determine the ultimate foosball champion, for all time or at least a week or two until the inevitable rematch. Elias's plastic players held the ball. He nudged it forward, yanked the stick sideways, spun a kick forward from the next man over, trying to sneak past the other team's defenses. Mario missed; Dan panicked. He jerked the whole table with his move, blasting the ball wildly out of his field and into the face of Allison, where it missed her eye by less than an inch.

She yelped. Dan stammered, Courtney shrieked, and Angel added a moderately calm, "Whoa."

"Dan, is there ice in the fridge?" called Elias, who had already started moving that direction despite that he had only started to learn the layout of the house.

"Uh, y-yeah," Dan said, before trying to offer an apology to his sister.

"Is there a hand towel somewhere?" Elias added.

"Er, in the, uh, drawer beneath, uh..." Dan tried to help, failing to find words in a hurry.

"Nevermind, got one." Elias came back as Courtney was trying to get a look at the welt now forming on Allison's face.

"Here, this'll stop the bleeding," he offered. She nodded thanks and placed the ice package on her face.

"Yow."

“Yeah, I bet. That was a heck of a hit you took there.”

“Dan can’t control his own strength,” Angel offered.

“You need to quit workin’ out, man.”

They chuckled. Within seconds, a new conversation had been struck up, and the two were off in their own world. Even Courtney took her leave to go socialize with another group, leaving just Elias and Allison. It took a while for either of them to say anything, but eventually Elias began: “You’re pretty good at foosball.”

“You’re not too bad yourself.”

“Do you practice a lot?”

“I used to. Dan won’t play me any more. I think it’s because I’m finally good enough to beat him.”

“Huh. This was my first time. I’m more used to real soccer.”

“Oh, are you really? Do you follow the World Cup and stuff, too?”

“Kind of. I only got into it for the first time this past Cup. That game against Germany in the quarterfinals was brutal.”

“Yeah, I still think we should’ve won. Seriously, what was with that handball business?”

“I dunno, refs are just kind of tough sometimes. Believe me, the ones in PAL soccer were way worse!”

“Haha, I can imagine.”

They continued this way for a while, shifting to other topics occasionally, until soon they were among the last remaining. “Oh, shoot, I was supposed to call my brother to pick me up,” Elias said suddenly. He quickly dug out his cell phone and started dialing.

“You have an older brother?” Allison asked.

“Yeah. He’s OK, I guess. The only reason he drives me around is ‘cause that was the condition for my parents buying him the car. I didn’t get any such deal when I got

my license. I guess they figure as long as he's around to play chauffeur, they don't need to get me a car."

She chuckled.

"I dunno, I kind of wish I wasn't the baby of the family sometimes, you know?"

"Yeah, I know, for sure."

o o o

Over the next days and months Elias discovered that befriending the sibling of his friend was actually quite easy. She already went to the same school, where she started joining them at lunch. When he hung out with Dan after school, it was a simple matter to extend the invitation to Allison and a great way to make life easy for his friends' parents. Even Dan seemed to take to it pretty naturally.

The first time they met up without Dan was for *Shaolin Soccer*. Elias's friend Zeke had been hyping up the movie for what seemed like a year as the release was rescheduled over and over, insisting that when he'd seen it in Mandarin it had been the best soccer movie ever. Elias was convinced, and he managed to talk Allison into seeing it, too, but Dan didn't share their passion for soccer and so he didn't feel enthused by the idea of a Chinese soccer movie.

The group was four: Mario, Elias, Zeke, and Allison. They filed into the theater ready for a cinematic masterpiece and ended up getting not exactly what they had bargained for: a comedy with all the trappings of a poorly-dubbed kung-fu movie, but with better special effects and a more outlandish plot. When Mui returned Sing's beat-up shoes to him, fixed with Hello Kitty patches, Mario nudged Elias and gestured that he should hold Allison's hand romantically.

“What?” Elias whispered back.

“Nevermind!”

After the movie, while Zeke was bemoaning the miserable dubbing (Elias and the others had thought there was nothing wrong with it, but a purist will be a purist) the group stopped for ice cream. While Allison and Zeke were trying to decide on their mix-ins, Elias begged Mario to know what the gesture had been about.

After he had assured they were safely out of hearing range, Mario whispered, “Well, weren’t you going to hold your girlfriend’s hand or something during the romantic part?”

“What?! She’s not my girlfriend!” Elias realized too late he’d said this so loud that Allison couldn’t help hearing. Involuntarily he looked her direction, and they traded glances that each bespoke a loss for how to proceed. The topic was dropped immediately, but hung awkwardly in the subtext of their conversations for a week.

After enough time had passed, finally they found an opportunity to sort it out. It was after school, before Elias’s soccer practice began and while Allison waited for the bus. They met without anyone else to hinder the conversation.

“Hey, uh, do you want to talk about, you know...”

“Yeah, I mean, uh... yeah.”

“Look, I... I don’t think-” - “I’ve always-” they began in unison.

“You first” she insisted.

“No, you can-”

“No, you.”

“Fine. Look, I’ve always thought of you as more of a sister to me than anything else. You’re a friend, and, I mean, like, you’re attractive, but I just can’t think of you that way, you know?”

“Really?” Elias had been worried she’d be crushed,

but instead Allison seemed elated. “I’ve always thought the same way.”

“So you don’t think we should...”

“No. Definitely not.”

“Good. Oh God, that’s a relief.” Elias smiled deeply, then caught himself, “Not that I think there’s anything wrong with you or anything, just...”

“Yeah. I know. I understand.”

“So should we set the record straight with everyone else?”

“Definitely. And after that, are you down for some one-on-one?”

“You mean soccer?”

“Of course I mean fucking soccer. Uh. Playing soccer. Stupid.”

They both laughed heartily. Possible Freudian slips be damned, they understood each other, and that was enough.

o o o

Elias and Allison maintained their friendship closely even though people around them continued to teasingly misconstrue their relationship. When the soccer team made it into the playoffs, Allison was there to watch Elias, and she gave him a hug when he passed to set up the winning goal. When Dan was in trouble with his parents because they found beers in his car, Elias heard from Allison and ended up driving the siblings to school for a couple weeks in the car he had inherited from Caleb when his brother transferred to a four-year college. When Elias had trouble working up his nerve to ask a girl out, Allison provided advice and encouragement. For nearly two years, they were closer and more supportive than any real siblings, even while Dan and Elias inevitably grew apart.

One day Allison called Elias for help. There was a guy she liked, she said, and he seemed to be pretty thick about the fact that she liked him. “Do I know this guy?” Elias asked.

“No, I know him through a friend from middle school,” she said. “You’ve never met him. His name’s Matt.”

“Since when do you know guys I haven’t met?” he teased.

“Since forever!” she said. “I *have* other friends, you know.” She feigned indignance. Her facial expression couldn’t be transmitted through the phone, but Elias did an admirable job of picturing it nonetheless.

“Well, have you told him you like him?”

“*Told* him? Won’t he think I’m a slut or something?”

“Hell no. Guys love it when a girl is forward and honest with them. God knows it doesn’t happen often enough.”

“Right. Um. I’m not sure I can do this.”

“Sure you can. If you really like him, just wait for the right moment and say, ‘Hey, I really like you, wanna see a movie sometime?’ or something. He’ll understand.”

“How do I know the right moment?”

“You’ll figure it out. I can only help so much.”

o o o

That was a Friday, so the next he heard from her was a few days later, at school on Monday. “So, how’d it go?” Elias asked.

Allison was all light and bubbles. “He’s so cool! We went bowling, and we hung out with all his friends. It was great.”

“So I guess that proves which of us is the better advice-giver, doesn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when you told me to ask out Sandra, that didn’t work out so well, did it?”

“Well, I can’t be blamed if your taste in girls is stupid.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

o o o

It wasn’t for a couple months before Elias realized that they were drifting apart. They rarely hung out on weekends any more, and when they did meet up (now that Elias was going to community college, they had less time together as a part of their normal days) it seemed like Allison was too preoccupied with covertly sending text messages to carry on a conversation. Elias didn’t take it too hard, though it felt a little tragic; but unlike a clingy parent, Elias was determined to let his adopted little sister go now that she had found a guy to take seriously.

But some of the things Allison was doing set him on edge. She didn’t tell him until Dan accused her of smelling like pot. She denied it on the spot, but later secretly admitted to Elias that she had started smoking with Matt and his friends. Elias wasn’t one to judge, but somehow it felt wrong to him. His innocent little soccer-playing sister, a pothead? He couldn’t picture it.

It wasn’t just that, though. Her attitude changed. Zeke became “that nerd,” when she wasn’t talking to his face. She started dressing differently. Her new clothes were more black, and more revealing. A lot more revealing. In time the only topics of conversation she seemed to be able to bring up were either some vaguely illicit things she’d done with Matt, or how her parents kept hassling her about it. Most of all, she seemed to adopt Matt’s opinions



of other people, which were hardly ever favorable and never polite. Elias tried to offer a positive viewpoint while not offending her; at some point, he gave up. They talked less and less.

He asked his mother one day, “Hey mom, have you ever known someone who was a bad influence on a friend of yours?”

“Of course,” she said. “Are you having problems with someone?”

“Yeah, it’s Allison. She’s changed, and it’s all because of Matt, her stupid boyfriend.”

“You’re not just jealous because you’re trying to protect her or something?”

“No, really, he’s a bad influence on her. He made her start smoking marijuana.”

“That does sound serious,” Elias’ mother said. “You can’t do anything to change her feelings, but you should definitely do what you can to stop her from doing illegal drugs.”

“Mom, I can’t call the cops on Allison. She’s my friend.”

“Well, sometimes a friend has to make hard choices.”

o o o

Elias debated it with himself, but after a while he decided the only way to solve things was by confronting Allison directly. An intervention, so to speak. He talked to Dan about it.

“She doesn’t listen to me, man. You’re wasting your time.”

“But maybe, if all of us...”

“Whatever.” That was Dan’s way of conceding.

Mario and Zeke were easier to convince. With the

four of them gathered, they formed the friend group of old, from two years beforehand. They gathered at Dan's house, after school.

When Allison got home, she was shocked to see the four of them waiting. "What is this?" she demanded. "You guys didn't tell me you were coming over."

"Well, we didn't drop by to hang out, Allison," Elias led.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, basically, I want to talk to you. We want to talk to you. About what you've been doing lately."

"What do you mean, what I've been doing lately? You make it sound like I'm whoring it up in some brothel during my spare time!"

"What he means is, you're turning into a bitch, Allison." Dan was as tactless as ever.

"What?"

"Look, what I mean is, I think your boyfriend—"

"Matt."

"I think Matt is being a bad influence on you." Elias gave her his most serious expression.

"Is that what this is? This is because you don't like my boyfriend? You've hardly *met* him! You can't understand what he's like!"

"I'm telling you, look at yourself! You're drinking, smoking, you go to Denny's at 3am and then dine and dash! You dress like a whore! You're seventeen! What happened to the innocent person you used to be?" Elias caught a dark look from Dan over the "drinking and smoking" bit. But at least he had some restraint about it, Elias thought.

"It's called 'growing up'. Come on, stop treating me like a baby. I'm not even your real sister!"

"You're *his* real sister," corrected Mario, pointing at Dan.

“I KNOW THAT!” she shouted. Mario just shrugged.

“Look. The World Cup is coming up in a couple of months. Did you even realize that?” Elias tried to calm the room down.

“Yes I know the fucking World Cup is fucking coming up soon! For chrissakes, Eli!”

“You know I don’t like being called Eli,” said Elias.

“Well, *you* should grow up and learn to fucking deal with it. I don’t have to deal with this shit.”

She stormed off. Elias tried to follow her, tried to protest, “Listen, can’t you calm down and hear what I’m trying to –” but Dan put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back.

“Give it up, man,” he said. “She’s not going to listen.”

Elias exhaled deeply. “I know. I know. I just, don’t want to see it turn out this way, you know? I don’t want to lose to bad habits. I don’t want to find out one day that I’m the immature one for caring whether Allison’s friendly and polite, or obeys the law, or dresses like a whore. I just want to know... that she’ll be alright.”

“I know,” said Dan, and for one brief moment the two of them were on exactly the same level, completely in tune with each other’s feelings. “But sometimes, man, people change. And no matter how hard you try, you can’t change them back.”